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AUTHOR Jacobson, Harvey K.
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ABSTRACT

To illustrate the experience of a nonprofit organization whose high respect for theory and research shaped the design and implementation of a major public relations program, this paper reports on a University of Michigan program to arrest erosion of the state financial support in a period of worsening economic problems. The next five sections of the paper discuss components of the communication process around which the program rationale and strategies were organized: (1) communicator, including the communication function, adaptive systems, organizational effectiveness, organizational climate, and time commitment; (2) audience, including organizational linkages to the public, public attitudes, and the behavior of legislators; (3) channels, including communication mode and communication mix; (4) content, including message strategies and content guidelines; and (5) effects, including hierarchy of effects and awareness emphasis. The following sections of the paper outline program goals, describe components of the program implementation, and discuss program evaluation and results. The summary points out the unifying effect of this public relations program on the state's higher education community. (DF)

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The Michigan Awareness Program: A Case Study in Effective External and Internal Organizational Communication

Harvey K. Jacobson

Department of Journalism
University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
Oshkosh, WI 54901

International Communication Association
Honolulu, Hawaii
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Various researchers suggest that the healthy organization is one that is able to adapt to change through action programs based on self-analysis, evaluation and research (Rosenberg, 1974; Grunig, 1984). Diagnostic and analytical studies of the organization and its environment are essential if managers of public relations departments are to uphold their responsibilities for contributing to policy decisions on organizational development. This paper reports on the case experience of a nonprofit organization whose high respect for theory and research shaped the design and implementation of a major public relations program.

INTRODUCTION

Statement of Problem

This paper reports on a program conducted by the University of Michigan in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During these years most state-assisted institutions of higher learning in the United States were receiving diminishing state legislative support proportionate to inflation and financial allocations to competing services. Analyzing patterns of financial support over eight years (1970-71 to 1977-78), the University of Michigan determined that State appropriations for higher education's operating expenses had fallen from 20.8 percent of the State General Fund to 16.3 percent. At the University of Michigan alone, as a percentage of General Fund operating income, State appropriations dropped from 73 percent to 59 percent in 20 years. From the University's standpoint, there was clearly a need to arrest the trend in erosion of State financial support that threatened the quality of education in a period of worsening economic problems.

Background

The University of Michigan, which was established in 1817, is one of the oldest public universities in the United States. A large, complex research university, it consistently ranks in the top ten American universities by various measures of quality, both in general academic terms and in strength of offerings in specific professional subjects and other academic disciplines. Enrollment in the fall of 1980 was 47,081 on three campuses (35,670 at Ann Arbor). Degree-holding alumni exceed 260,000. The instructional staff in 1979 totaled 2,465.

Total operating budget in 1980-81 was $654 million. This paper focuses on a public relations program aimed at communicating the need for improved state appropriations, which in 1980-81 totaled $155 million. This $155 million sum is the major source of funding (59 percent in 1980-81) for the University's teaching, administrative and plant maintenance budget (i.e., the University's "General Fund").

PROGRAM DESIGN

The literature of theory and research in organizational communication provided a base upon which to diagnose the problem and design a program. The rationale and strategies were organized around the components of the communication process: communicator, audience, channels, content and effects.

Communicator

Communication Function. The successful operation of an organization depends to a large degree on human communication inside the organization and between the organization and its environment (Galbraith, 1972). "In organizations people interact through communication for common objectives. Inside the organization power and social interaction are exercised through communication. An organization

is connected with its environment by exchange of energy, matter and information" (Wiio, 1978, p. 91).

The successful manager in modern organizations is increasingly expected to base decisions on a growing body of systematic studies (Farace et al., 1977). Reviewing theories and issues of organizational communication, Bernstein reported on a survey of the most significant issues as perceived by communicators practicing in organizational settings. The major issues identified included the interface between the communicator and the internal audience, and the interface between the communicator and external publics (Bernstein, 197[illegible], p. 2).

Adaptive Systems. The "natural system" approach of Thompson (1967) and Thompson and McEwen (1958) regards the organization as a unit in interaction with its environment. Organizational survival is the goal and the organization will adapt in such a way as to achieve it. Bargaining, co-optation and coalition are cooperative strategies which facilitate adjustment. Rather than wait for new public goals to evolve fully and then react, or attempt to manipulate the socio-economic system to thwart change, the organization seeks to continually narrow the gap between the emerging public goals and emerging institutional goals. Management uses this interactive approach to anticipate external change and adjust the organization's operations to minimize the gap between performance and expectations. When consistently applied over time, the interactive approach improves the chances of producing goals that both the organization and the public can accept.

Organizational Effectiveness. A communication program should complement the organization of which it is a part. If the communication manager accepts the "adaptive systems" point of view, the program can serve to promote organizational effectiveness. Goal attainment by an organization is defined by Thompson (1967,

p. 32) not in terms of a maximum efficiency criterion but as "satisficing," that is, the organization seeks to accommodate to the demands of its internal and external environments. The need for data and information processing arises from the need to reduce uncertainty concerning the internal and external environments. In stable environments, this process of accommodation involves activity in the performance mode--routine adaptation to changes within existing perceptual structures of organizational members. In complex and dynamic environments, this process of accommodation involves activity in the developmental or learning mode--reassessing the adequacy of existing perceptual structures, avoiding fixation on outdated sets of perceptual windows, and searching for new data (Dunn, 1974, pp. 32-33).

Organizational Climate. A communication program is more likely to achieve effective results if it is located in an organization whose overall "environmental quality" is supportive (Farace, et al., 1977, pp. 223-224). Relating the public relations function to the purposes of the organization as a whole, the Statement of Mission for University Relations and Development at the University of Michigan states: "The public relations program is built on the principle that the credibility of the University depends upon its reputation for presenting information openly and accurately, consistent with the University's central role as a marketplace of ideas and a seeker of truth." Program goals and objectives emerge from this mission statement.

Time Commitment. A vital consideration in public communication campaigns is duration. If insufficient time is allotted, the impact may be short-lived even if the campaign succeeds in creating initial awareness of both the problem and the problem solution.

Audience

Organizational Linkages to Publics. One of the most productive approaches to the design and management of communication programs is to distinguish between internal and external publics (Farace et al., 1977, p. 255).

Also helpful in determining various kinds of programming are four types of linkages Esman (1972, pp. 19-40) identifies as critical for an organization to successfully interact with its environment. They are: enabling linkages, including groups that provide authority and control, such as the Board of Regents; functional linkages, including publics that provide inputs (employees) and benefit from outputs (users of research); normative linkages, including organizations facing similar problems and sharing similar values (other colleges and universities), and diffused linkages (the 5.2 million registered voters of the State).

Public Attitudes. The public's declining confidence in America's social institutions is confirmed by survey research. The percentage of people expressing "high confidence" in the leadership of higher education dropped from 61 percent in 1966 to 41 percent in 1977 (Harris, 1980).

Behavior of Legislators. Various studies report on the response patterns of state legislators in processing information (Eulau and Quinley, 1947; Kingdon, 1973) and the value of linkage agents and networks in legislative decision making (Boynton, 1969).

Channels

Communication Mode. Researchers remind us that mass media are relied upon heavily for transmission of information, but influence is more likely to be transmitted through an interpersonal network than through the mass media.

Communication Mix. Media should be selected on the basis of the potential for return on organizational investment. A wide variety of channels may be used to broaden the message where appropriate or to personalize the message to be targeted to a selected audience under other circumstances. The complex process of selecting appropriate channels has been summarized by Barton (1980, p.39), who diagrams "where to invest communication efforts" in terms of awareness, comprehension, motivation and commitment.

Content

Message Strategies. Message selection can be based on the levels of effects one seeks to achieve in the campaign. The communication manager who desires to attain public awareness benefits most from a message strategy of believability, assuring the audience that "this is indeed a problem." If the purpose is public information the primary message strategy is relevance, i.e., "this affects you." When aiming for public education, one enlists opinion leaders to motivate persons to accept the subject as one they can apply to their daily lives; the message strategy is memorability (Grunig in "Six Levels of Public Relations Activity," 1983, p. 3).

Content Guideline. A public communication campaign on a chosen issue increases its chances of successfully achieving awareness and action if it incorporates information not only on the nature of the problem but also on the impact of the problem on audience members and organized proposals for solutions.

Effects

Heirarchy of Effects. The heirarchy-of-effects models proposal that audience behavior is a product of movement through stages such as attention, information, awareness, understanding, involvement and action.

What effects should the program pursue? A nonprofit organization must be sensitive to both legal requirements and public perceptions of public relations activities. Because of state statutes and federal regulations, advocacy initiatives by employees of state-assisted institutions of higher education are restricted in many ways. The University of Michigan has long endorsed the idea that its public relations activities shall follow high ethical standards and fully comply with laws covering lobbying and related activities.

Awareness Emphasis. The program was named the Michigan Awareness Program to highlight its major purpose--Awareness. In order to reduce the apathy among citizens regarding higher education funding, the University needed a comprehensive program to create problem recognition. Thus, Awareness was the primary program goal.

The associated goal was Translation--creating positive attitudes that could be transferred into supportive behavior. It was recognized that beyond problem recognition it was important to encourage interest and involvement in order to place the issue of underfunding on the agenda and to stimulate corrective action. Desired action included immediate improvement of financial support, and longer-term organizational revitalization.

PROGRAM GOALS

The goals of the program were these:

Awareness Effect:

1. Organization--to organize a systematic program to coordinate institutional resources to enhance public understanding and support for higher education in the State of Michigan, and, specifically, for the University of Michigan.

2. Information--to inform people about the status and needs of higher education, using data that put issues in perspective rather than allowing decisions to be made on a limited, fragmented basis.

3. Awareness--to increase the awareness level of selected audiences and the general public of the State.

Translation Effect:

4. Facilitation--to pursue the three previous goals so that persons and groups choosing to do so could productively participate in the political process and achieve wider support for improved funding, that is, engage in efforts that would facilitate action.

5. Renewal--to pursue the first four goals in order to foster the evolution of a process of adjustment which would improve the institution's capacity for organizational renewal.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Timetable

The discussion of options, drafting of proposals, and revision of the final proposal occurred in early 1977. The proposal was approved by the Executive Officers, then by the Regents, in late 1977.

Year 1--Awareness Program begins, 1978-79.

Year 2--1979-80.

Year 3--1980-81.

Year 4--Extension of Program, 1981-82.

Year 5--Extension of Program, 1982-83.

Budget

A total of $135,000 was approved for the initial three-year program. Later approximately $40,000 was approved for each of the next two years. The money did not come from tax funds but was raised from private sources. Costs referred to here primarily relate to printing, postage, mailing and telephone expenses.

Program Plan

The University decided it would take its case for improved understanding and support of higher education into the communities of the State, at grass roots level, to inform citizens of problems, the implications of continued underfunding

and the need for a change in funding priorities.

Program planners recognized the important role played by lawmakers in the decision process. Analysis of studies of legislative behavior led to the development of strategies based on the assumption that legislators: (1) Treat higher education as an area of relatively low political salience because articulated comment from a broad section of the population is missing, (2) Rely heavily on colleagues they consider to be experts, (3) Listen closely to key political leaders, and (4) Often vote on the basis of what they perceive their constituents to want.

Program elements have been described by Yoder and May (1980). The communication campaign sought to place the higher education problem on the agenda of news media and public relations media. These media were considered to have an agenda-setting effect, enabling passive constituencies to begin to recognize the problem. Problem recognition would raise the public's perceived involvement with the issue. Interpersonal support through social interaction and support groups would reduce "constraint recognition" (Grunig, 1984, p. 151) and show people they could do something about the issue of underfunding.

Program planners determined that content of messages would be largely informational, seeking to expand knowledge of higher education's problems and accomplishments, and help create citizen and legislative support for Michigan higher education in general and the University of Michigan in particular.

Emphasis was placed on the University's value to the entire State. Content emphasized these themes:

--The University has had for decades, and continues to have, a wide-reaching impact on the cultural, social and economic lives of all citizens of the State.

--Because of shrinking State support, educational institutions have made severe cutbacks in their teaching, research and service missions.

--Shrinking financial support has forced tuition raises, resulting in a situation that squeezes the socio-economic base from which a good mix of students is drawn.

--Erosion of quality has had an impact on not only students but also on the millions of other beneficiaries of the efforts of higher education.

--Higher education affects, directly or indirectly, the quality of life of all Michigan citizens.

--Quality education cannot be maintained or enhanced without continued and adequate support from citizens of the State.

--The problem of underfunding can be alleviated by citizen support for increased legislative appropriations for higher education.

EVALUATION/RESULTS

The Michigan Awareness Program plan included an evaluation component. An Evaluation Plan Committee prepared a report on assumptions, objectives, alternative strategies and recommendations. The plan, which incorporated both formative and summative evaluations, is reviewed elsewhere (Radock and Jacobson, 1982).

Organization

Management. Formerly a senior administrative officer at the University of Michigan, the author of this paper was a member of the team responsible for the design, implementation and evaluation of the Michigan Awareness Program. The program was directed by the State and Community Relations Office of the University. The director of this office worked under the supervision of the Offices of the Vice President for University Relations and Development, and the Vice President for State Relations. Work was accomplished largely through reassignment of existing staff in various units. Operational units in University Relations and and Development were Information Services, Publications Office, State and Community

Relations, Alumni Records, Broadcasting Services, Health Sciences Relations, Development, and Office of the Vice President. At that time these units employed around 150 personnel and operated with an annual budget of $2.1 million.

Involvement. Strongly supportive and heavily involved in the program were the Board of Regents, the University President, the Alumni Association, the Alumni Council Board of Directors, the Vice President for Financial Affairs, and the Institute for Social Research.

Information

Information Bank. Collection and analysis of data to provide information to be communicated to the University's varied audiences became a fundamental part of the effort. Valuable sources within the organization were offices dealing with institutional research, university budget and academic planning. External sources supplying helpful perspectives were such organizations as the Education Commission of the States and the American Council on Education.

Content. Especially meaningful and well-received were informational reports on processes, such as stages of the budget request process; analyses, such as percentage distribution of General Fund appropriations to higher education compared with other agencies and services; trends such as changes in higher education allocations in Michigan compared with other states; and services, such as research findings applied to the problems of State government. Also effective were messages expressed in terms of benefits to the health, welfare and pocketbooks of citizens.

Audiences. Identified as the primary internal target groups were faculty, staff and students. External target groups were alumni, parents of students, community leaders, State lawmakers, advisors to lawmakers, major in-state donors, media gatekeepers, and the State electorate.

Audience Segments. As the program progressed, target audiences became more and more refined. For example, at least eight specific sub-groups of legislators required different degrees of attention: (1) legislators representing the geographical area within which the organization is located, (2) legislators representing the area served by the organization in terms of enrollment and public services, (3) legislators interested in education in general and in higher education in particular, (4) legislators who are alumni, (5) legislators in leadership positions, (6) former legislators who retain close ties with current lawmakers, (7) newly-elected legislators, and (8) legislators as a whole.

Channels. Space limitations preclude the presentation of details on channels used. However, here are examples of some of the most successful vehicles for coveying messages to various audiences:

-- A slide presentation used by the University President in meeting with community leaders around the state.

-- Slides, charts, and other background material provided to speakers for use with service clubs and internal University organizations.

-- A monthly newsletter, Memo to Michigan Citizens, which was mailed to legislators, community leaders, selected University personnel, alumni club officials, and in-State members of the Presidents Club, a donor organization (total circulation 4,000).

-- A quarterly Family Memo to parents of undergraduate students of the Ann Arbor campus (circulation 25,000).

-- "The University and the State," a page devoted to state issues in Michigan Alumnus, a magazine which is mailed 10 times a year to the Alumni Association's 48,000 members.

-- Campus/Capitol Contact, an occasional "insiders" newsletter for key University faculty and staff.

-- The internal University newspaper, The University Record, a tabloid with a circulation of 23,000.

Awareness

Communication through the various channels mentioned above, plus news releases to the mass media, and other information activities, provided

information that was pertinent and timely. By the end of fiscal 1980, for example, Memo to Michigan Citizens had been published 30 times, and the monthly Michigan Alumnus page, 30 times.

Grass roots involvement facilitated increased awareness. As an example, the Community Leaders Program began in the first year with dinners with eight Michigan cities, with around 60 local opinion leaders invited to each dinner. In the first three years of the program, 24 cities were visited, building a network of 1,200 potential advocates for the University.

Opinion leaders throughout the State were provided an opportunity to learn about the implications of University underfunding for both the State and their home regions. The message was packaged in a 28-minute slide-sound presentation, "Michigan Odyssey," which spotlighted the University's efforts to help revitalize the State's economy. The showings began in the fall of 1981 and in 18 months were seen by 106 groups, reaching at least 5,300 people in leadership positions in 53 Michigan villages, towns and cities.

Open and frank discussion of the problem of underfunding helped place the issue higher on the public agenda. As the legislative relations and retrenchment processes unfolded over the years, coverage in the mass media increased not only in quantity but also in quality. Media news reports and commentaries became less alarmist and more reflective. As an editorial in the Detroit Free Press said, "The university is an integral part of our economic recovery and should be not only safeguarded but also fostered if it is to expand its contribution."

The level of financial spport of higher education was one of the most debated issues before the Michigan House and Senate Appropriations Committees in 1979. Homemakers and union leaders, politicians and industrialists entered the statewide discussion, which tended to begin in terms of financial costs and often expanded into considerations of values and priorities.

Several organizations endorsed the concept of underfunding and the need to stop the erosion of state financial support for colleges and universities. The Michigan Chamber of Commerce stated that support for higher education was overdue. The Presidents Council of State Colleges and Universities noted that the Awareness Program message was "well overdue, something that is receiving immediate attention."

The Executive Office, and House and Senate fiscal agency leaders devoted an increasing amount of time to higher education reports and debates. The Governor of Michigan incorporated into his State of the State message a statement that "in the next decade we must recognize and fund the institutions of higher education as the total state and community resources they have become. I have asked the Department of Management and Budget to work closely with the Legislature to rectify some of the serious underfunding problems for our colleges and universities."

Facilitation

The presentation of information that led to awareness evolved into interest, involvement, agenda-setting, priority-adjustment and legislative action. Legislators voted to halt the erosion of State funding to higher education. In fiscal 1979, the percentage of State general funds appropriated for higher education increased for the first time in nine years. Concurrently, the proportion of higher education appropriation that went to the University of Michigan rose, moving the University from fifteenth and last in fiscal 1978 to eighth in 1980 and first in 1981 (Radock and Jacobson, 1982).

Renewal

The interplay of internal and external forces in a limited-resources environment gives an organization ample opportunity for reassessment and renewal. While maximum effort is being expended to stimulate external support for the

organization, equal consideration needs to be devoted to examining internal operations for ways of maintaining or increasing quality and flexibility.

During the early 1980s the University of Michigan, and other institutions of higher education in the State, grappled with a combination of shrinking support in real dollars and emergency rescissions enacted with virtually no advance notice. As the economy of the State of Michigan sank deeper into depression and the University's financial difficulties worsened, the University rejected the idea of across-the-board cutbacks within the organization. Rather, it approved a "smaller but better" policy to reduce the number of programs and to use the savings to maintain and/or enhance the quality of those priority programs that remained. Reports and reviews of the University's "downsizing" plan (Dougherty, 1981; Jacobson, 1984; Lipschutz, 1985) consider its advantages and disadvantages as a process for retaining organizational health and flexibility in the face of declining resources.

The extensive dialog on the future of the organization increased awareness in the various constituencies of the need for and value of periodic adjustment of the University's relationships with its environment. Deliberations of advisory bodies, such as faculty advisory committees on university relations and government relations, not only focused attention on the problem area (underfunding) but also gave key people a sense of participation in goal deliberation on a much broader front.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Concerned about a pattern of shrinking financial support from the State, University of Michigan officials approved a public relations program aimed at increasing awareness of the problems of higher education, arresting the appropriations decline, and fostering mechanisms for organizational renewal.

Principles from organizational communication provided the base for developing a public relations plan that was sensitive to the realities of the prevailing social and political environment as well as responsive to economic uncertainties, power structures and organizational constraints.

The program concentrated on internal and external communication. Carefully designed program elements were delivered to target audiences through a mixture of person-to-person contact, group interaction through meetings and dinners, specialized communication through publications, and mass communication through news media.

The share of legislative funding rose, reversing a nine-year decline. Authorities extended the three-year program by two years. The program received national awards from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education and became a respected model on other campuses around the nation.

The Michigan Awareness Program is but one dimension of a complex process by which the University secures financial resources and develops effective relationships with governmental officials and the public (Jacobson, 1978; Kennedy, 1981). While feedback, observation and evaluation efforts indicate the program enhanced understanding and support of the organization, no cause-and-effect relationship can be soundly established between the Awareness Program and the legislative funding levels because many factors could impinge on these changes.

One of the major benefits of thn Awareness Program has been the development of tested communication systems that can be mobilized effectively on quick notice. The program developed analytical prowess and flexible structures providing a "rapid response force" for handling crisis situations. This was evidenced in the third year of the program when a drastic tax cut measure was placed on the State ballot. Opponents of the Tisch Tax Plan maintained that "Proposal D" threatened

to reduce state funding to Michigan universities by 50 percent. The Awareness Program's existing communication channels and network of supporters were called upon to inform voters of the dangers of the proposal. Working closely with the Michigan Association of Public Information Officers, a committee of the Presidents Council of State Colleges and Universities, Awareness Program leaders coordinated an extensive state-wide campaign (Wentworth, 1981). Voters rejected Proposal D. The successful public relations effort "had a tremendously unifying effect on the state's higher education community" (Wentworth, 1981, p. 16) and was honored with a Silver Anvil Award in Public Affairs from the Public Relations Society of America.

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